

Preservation and Perseverance

We very commonly hear condemnations of those who teach “Once saved, always saved.” Presumably this means that a person can make a profession of faith, and then continue sinning without consequence, because they “have their ticket to heaven”. It should be obvious to anyone of spiritual sensitivity that such a belief is not only wrong but pernicious.

However, the danger we face is not so much from such teaching, but in an over-correction that denies the security of the believer. There are two related issues here – from God’s side is his preservation of the believer (he keeps us in Christ), and from our side is the need for perseverance (keeping ourselves in the faith). So I believe it is possible to say we believe in “once saved, always saved” if we clarify what we mean by that. I do not like the phrase though, because it causes people’s heads to explode.

God’s Preservation of the Believers

Here are the main relevant passages:

Jn. 6:37 – “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.”

Jn. 6:39-40 – “And this is the Father’s will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day. And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day.”

Jn. 6:44 – “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day.”

Jn. 10:28-29 – “And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand.”

Jn. 17:2-3 – “As thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him. And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.”

Jn. 17:6 – “I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world: thine they were, and thou gavest them me; and they have kept thy word.”

Jn. 17:9-12 – “I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine. And all mine are thine, and thine are mine; and I am glorified in them. And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in thy name: whose that thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled.”

Jn. 17:15 – “I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil.”

Observations from these passages:

1. God has given certain, specific people to Christ.
2. Those who come to Christ will be received – He will not turn them away (6:37).
3. God’s determination is that of those he gives to Christ, not a single one will be lost – they will receive eternal life and be raised up at the last day (6:39-40).
4. It is impossible for anyone to come to Christ unless the Father draws him (6:44).
5. Christ gives these people eternal life, and they will never perish (10:28)
6. No one can remove these people from the hand of Christ, or from the hand of the Father (10:28-29).
7. Every one whom the Father gives to Christ will receive eternal life, and thus come to know God through Christ (6:37 and 17:2-3).
8. Those who come to Christ will keep Jesus’ word (obey him – 17:6).

9. Jesus' prayer is that God would keep (preserve) these people from evil, that not one of them would be lost (17:9-12, 15)

Perseverance of the Believers

On the other hand, there are several places where we are warned against false professions, backsliding, apostasy, and careless living.

- Parable of the sower and the seed (the seed in the stony ground, and among thorns) – Mk. 4:5-7, 15-19
- “He that shall endure to the end, the same shall be saved” – Mt. 24:13
- Parable of wise and foolish virgins – Mt. 25:1-13
- Those who say unto me “Lord, Lord ...” (Mt. 7:21-23)
- The love of many shall wax cold (Mt. 24:12)
- Many will fall away and be offended (2 Thess. 2:3)
- Warnings against apostasy (Heb. 3:12-14, 6:4-9, 10:26-31)
- Examples of people who turned back, and thus showed that “they were never of us” (1 Jn. 2:19).
- Those who deny Christ, he will deny before the Father (Mt. 10:32-33).
- Admonitions to perseverance and warnings not to look back (Lk. 9:62).

Dilemma

How do these sobering passages square with the ones showing that none the Father gives to Christ will be lost? What about people who backslide or even apostasize? What about the warnings to endure? Why should we even attempt to live holy lives or endure tribulation, if we will get into heaven anyway? We all know people who have at one time “prayed the sinner’s prayer” or made some profession of faith, and maybe even had genuine appearance of salvation, and yet now are nowhere to be found. Are they going to be received as if they were still professing Christians? Do they need to “get saved” again?

Resolution of the Problem

It is quite apparent, and even predicted, that there will be many, especially in the last days, who will fall away from the faith, and deny Christ. We need to distinguish between those who come to Christ by the Father’s drawing, and are actually given new life, being born again, and those who make some verbal or apparent commitment to Christ, but do not stick with it. It is possible to make a religious decision that has the outward but temporary appearance of salvation, but will eventually fail. In short, I do not believe that such people ever were really saved in the sense of Christ giving them eternal life. Such people do not need to “get saved again”, because they were never saved in the first place. They are tares.

Is it possible for genuinely saved people to backslide? Yes, but if so, God will ultimately seek them out and bring them back to the flock, so they will eventually return to a life of repentance and obedience.

What is our responsibility?

We are not God, and so cannot always distinguish between those who are genuine but weak Christians, and those who look like believers but are self-deluded. Therefore we should give people the benefit of the doubt and pray for them that they would “get with it” spiritually, and live the life that Jesus has given them. In the end, there will be a harvest of the wicked and of the righteous, and the angels will know who is who.

It is apparent from the scriptures in John that it is God who does the keeping of his people, and yet the Bible is filled with commandments and admonitions to flee sin, repent, to be holy, to endure, to never deny Christ, etc.

Jude shows both sides of preservation:

Jude 21 – “Keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.”

Jude 24-25 – “Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy. To the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen”

So from our side, we are to do everything in our power to keep ourselves in the way, in the expectation and hope of his mercy and an eternal home in the heavens with him. But at the same time we realize that it is really him that is keeping us, and that we can have confidence that we are safe in his hands. We recognize that it is really him that is putting in us the desire and the will to endure. Phl. 2:13 – “For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.”

This really shows the work of the whole trinity – the Father gives us to the Son, Jesus gives us eternal life, and we are sealed by the Holy Spirit (marked as God’s own). In this present life, God keeps and preserves us unto his heavenly kingdom by giving us the motivation, the will, and the enabling to walk in obedience, repentance, and perseverance, and we will be resurrected at the last day.

2 Corinthians 13:5 – “Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?” “Reprobate” in Greek is ἀδόκιμος (adokimos), which means something (like a metal) that has not stood the test; it is not approved.

Look honestly at your life, and ask yourself whether you have the real thing, or whether you have deluded yourself with a false profession. Is there any real fruit of godliness and holiness in your life? Do you desire to obey and please God? If you sin, do you just ignore it and hope God will too, or do you truly repent in sorrow over it, and ask his forgiveness?

1 Thess. 5:23 – “... I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

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